

All Together in One Place

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

God of power and grace,
Fill us with the wisdom of your Word
and the understanding of your Spirit
so that we may be your church,
a people with dreams and visions
at work in all the world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

It helps to know the Jewish background of our faith on this day of Pentecost. The Feast of Weeks occurs fifty days after Passover. It was one of the three Jewish festivals where Israelites traveled to Jerusalem for the one day festival. An offering of new grain was made to God from the first fruits of harvest that year. This was a day of gratitude and commitment to God for the provision of daily bread.





There was another momentous event connected with this holy day. Fifty days after Passover Moses received the Ten Commandments from God on Mt. Sinai. At God's presence the mountain shook. Fire, thunder, and smoke surrounded Moses. People can't "live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

This fire imagery is often used in connection with God's Word. It was described in Judaism that fire rested upon the heads of the rabbis when they poured over the Scriptures or discussed the Torah together. So now, the resurrected Christ, the "New Moses," fifty days after his resurrection, on Pentecost, brings the first fruits of the Spirit to his people to continue his work on earth. Just as Moses went up to Mt. Sinai to encounter God, Jesus went up to heaven to give us not words carved in stone, but the divine energy of God burning in our hearts. "You will receive power," says Jesus, "when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth."



Let's hear the word of the Lord from...

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21 (NRSVue)

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ 'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “All Together in One Place”

Brothers Chip Heath and Dan Heath share a heartwarming story in their insightful book *“The Power of Moments.”* It was an emergency for the Hurn family. Joshie got left behind in Florida where the family had just vacationed. Joshie was their four-year-old’s beloved stuffed giraffe. There would be no sleeping without Joshie. Father Chris Hurn had to think fast. In a fit of desperation that countless parents have experienced, Chris weighed his options—and he came to the conclusion that he had to creatively and lovingly... lie. Or so he thought.



“Joshie’s doing well,” said the dad. “He’s just taking an extended vacation at the resort.” His son bought it and drifted off to sleep. Later that night, a staff member of the resort called to let the parents know that Joshie had been found. Relieved, Chris asked a favor. “Could you take a picture of Joshie lounging on a deck chair by the pool, to show that he had been vacationing?”

A few days later, Joshie arrived from Florida, but he was not alone. He came with a binder full of pictures. One picture had Joshie sunbathing. Another had Joshie driving a golf cart. Joshie hung out with the hotel parrot. He got a massage at the spa—with cucumbers covering his eyes. Joshie even got to monitor security cameras in the control room. Chris and his wife were delighted, they shared this on social media, and their post went viral. **Why did everyone love this story so much?**

It “broke the script.”

We all have scripts of how things unfold in life. We know how it goes and what you’re supposed to do. It’s all figured out before it happens. Life is predictable, and so we go through the motions. But when something new and surprising comes into the scene, it totally changes the experience. Our assumptions and routines are turned upside down. We see life differently. The Ritz Carlton broke the script for the Hurn family.

The Holy Spirit “breaks the script” of our lives and faith. We’re creatures of habit and are prone to fall into ruts—living “ho hum,” run of the mill lives. We can feel stuck... like there’s no way out. Enter the Holy Spirit who breathes new life into our lives and faith.

The church before Pentecost was missing their “Joshie.” Yes, Jesus rose from the dead. But now he had returned to the Father. He mentioned sending another Comforter, but “he” was strangely absent. Had Jesus forgotten? Was he missing or on permanent vacation? And then came Pentecost. And boy did the Spirit break the script. The good news is that the Spirit is still breaking scripts today. The Holy Spirit is the presence and power of God at work on earth.

One of the words for the Spirit is *dunamis*, Greek for “power.” Can you guess what other word comes from *dunamis*?... Dynamite. There’s power and energy with the Spirit. The Spirit gets things moving... including the Church. Pentecost is for all Christians... not just the Pentecostals. Heaven knows we Presbyterians need all the Pentecostal power of the Spirit we can get. So let’s discover today how we can allow the Spirit to break the script of our lives and the Church.

First – Prayer and gathering together.

In the book of Acts, whenever the church is gathered together and praying—*look out!* God is about to move. The church was convened together waiting for the “power from on High.”

That’s why it’s so important for us to faithfully gather together, praying together, and expectantly looking for a touch from God. In doing this, we experience the strength and guidance to carry out God’s will. Prayer and gathering together prepare and position us to receive fresh winds in our sails.

Second – Be open to the Spirit moving in mysterious ways.

Let’s have a thoughtful and mindful faith, but be OPEN to the mystery, wonder, and enchantment of our spirituality. The Holy Spirit is the power of heaven here on earth. And we can’t control or manufacture what God wants to do and the way he wants to do it.

Astonishment, amazement, joy, and wonder happen when we encounter and are filled with the Spirit. The activity of the Spirit of Jesus breaks the script and reaches down deep into our lives. And like a gravitational pull, it draws in others.

This openness and expectancy involve surrender. We offer ourselves to the Spirit and see him take hold of us: our tongue, our voice, our mind, our heart... our *everything*. We don’t always know how it will look or feel.

Sometimes the wind of the Spirit is a still small voice. Other times it can come with hurricane force. We can’t always explain it, but it’s real. We’ve experienced it. That mighty rushing wind kindles the flames of God’s love in us. A holy curiosity is fanned into flame in us. We’re emboldened to step out in Spirit-led spontaneity... and it draws others in because it’s *different*. Unpredictable. It breaks the tired script of our society.

Not everyone will understand and accept these mysteries. Some thought they were filled with wine, not the Spirit. I like Peter’s tongue in cheek response to their scorn—evidently 9 am was considered to be a time that people got into trouble. It’s 9 am—they can’t be getting into trouble. But John the Baptist called it when Jesus was on earth saying, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Divine possibility is opened for us with the resurrected Christ. He revises the scripts and stories of our lives with hope and change. As we saw last week, He baptizes us and washes us clean, making us a new creation. We can repent and change our ways and receive second chances.

When we’re open, we also listen. Peter is still preaching his Pentecost sermon, reminding us to listen closely. In fact, Peter uses an interesting Greek word for “listen” which literally means “let me place it in your ears.” Immanuel, listen to the Spirit and the Word working together, provoking, evoking, and awakening us. Let your perspectives and lives be reframed and reformed by the Spirit of Christ, who can change the very course of our lives.

Third – the Spirit breaks down walls.

Being filled with the Spirit is for everyone—old and young, male and female, rich and poor, people of every skin tone. The Spirit can touch all human conditions and situations. When the Spirit takes hold of our lives and church, we're transformed from observers to participants in the life of God. And then we're sent out and given a task.

The Spirit protects us from becoming walled in. We just can't keep Jesus to ourselves. *Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. As Peter quoted the prophet Joel:

"Sons and daughters will prophesy."

"Young men will see visions" and "old men will dream dreams."

"I will pour out my Spirit on all people."

Everyone matters. Signs and portents of God's activity will be all around us.

The same Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation is inside us, creatively energizing us to reach across borders and divides—healing our cultural divides, political divides, religious divides, geographical divides, and ethnic divides. The Spirit brings peace, unity, and greater understanding. The curse of confusion of the Tower of Babel is reversed.

Like Peter, the Spirit inspires us to translate what God is doing and how it applies to our lives. The Spirit enabled those at Pentecost to sing God's praises fluently in languages they didn't know. God wants everyone to hear the good news in their heart language—no matter your culture or generation. Galileans were not known for their great linguistic skills or even pleasing accents. But with God at work in them, they could clearly and miraculously testify to God's goodness to the world in other mother tongues.

Fourth – and finally, the Spirit refreshes and deepens our reading of Scripture.

The experience of Pentecost brought Peter back to the Hebrew Scriptures and the prophet Joel, testifying that the resurrected Jesus was the source of this outpouring of the Spirit. So the same Spirit floods our lives and draws us back to Scripture, making it come alive for us, and giving us fresh and timely guidance on how to live our lives today to God's glory. The Spirit helps us connect the dots as to what God is leading us to do. The world can see Christ at work in us and we invite them to join us in this abundant life.

And let's be honest, there are times where our faith feels dry and stale—it happens, it happens to me. Then we keep gathering, we keep praying, trusting that the "wind and the fire of the Spirit that never goes out" will touch us once again.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Pentecost*" from Rabbula Gospels, Syrian, c. 585, Florence, Laurentian Library.

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